

Revisiting Switzerland's North Africa Program

From its inception shortly after the uprisings in North Africa, Switzerland's North Africa program has adopted a needs-based, nuanced approach. The uncertainties of the transitions, nevertheless, circumscribe where and how it can be effective. Ultimately, a long-term commitment to supporting the transitions is necessary.

By Lisa Watanabe

Following the uprisings in North Africa, Switzerland moved rapidly to set up a North Africa Program in March 2011 to support the transitions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya as well as the reforms in Morocco through projects tailored to needs on the ground in the areas of democratic transitions and human rights, economic development, and employment, to which the majority of funding is allocated, as well as migration. Based on the realization that Switzerland's economic, energy, security, and migration interests depend upon stability in North Africa, the program represented an increased financial commitment and extended thematic scope of previous [Swiss engagement in North Africa](#). Four years after its creation, high hopes that the uprisings would lead to transitions to democracy have been transformed into a sober realization that the transitions are uncertain and differentiated, and, above all, require a long-term commitment. Originally set to run until 2016, the program is now expected to be extended and a new strategy is currently being developed for the period 2017–2020. Therefore, a window of opportunity now exists to consider whether it needs to be adjusted and, if so, how.

Unfinished Transitions

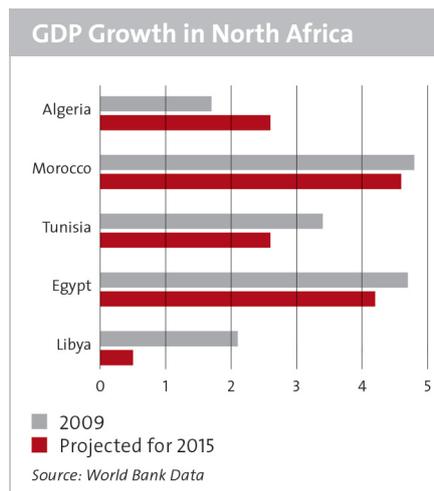
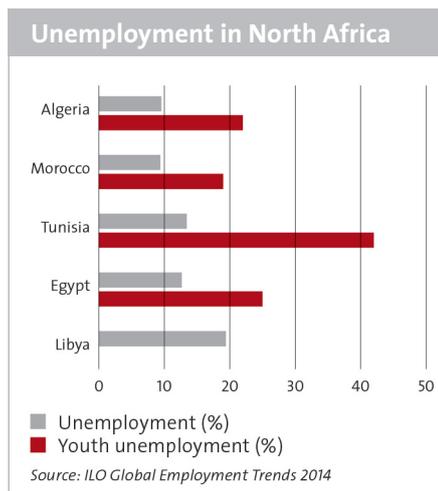
The uprisings that started in Tunisia in 2010 and swept through the region in 2011 have not led to greater political accounta-



A child looks on, at Citi Hofra, near Algiers. In Algeria, stability wins over anger at unemployment and economic torpor (9 April 2014). *Louafi Larbi / Reuters*

bility and dignity, as sought by protestors, perhaps with the partial exception of Tunisia. While Tunisia has adopted a new constitution and democratically elected its parliament at the end of 2014, the Bardo Museum and Sousse attacks, as well as that against a bus carrying presidential guards in Tunis, in 2015 have raised the risk that measures taken the name of security could lead to backsliding with regards to the democratic transition. Each of the transi-

tion processes is following its own unique and uncertain path. Since the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Egypt has been heavily dominated by the security forces, and its military-backed government has engaged in the systematic repression of domestic critics. In Libya, political authority is now highly fragmented, with polarization along tribal, regional, and ideological lines, though agreement in October 2015 on the formation of a national unity



government is cause for cautious optimism. Other countries, such as Morocco, where no uprising occurred, are implementing only limited reforms.

The socio-economic grievances that were among the major causes of the uprisings remain largely unaddressed. The uprisings and ensuing instability have negatively affected economic growth, which in most cases is worse than before the upheavals in 2011, as well as investment and foreign currency reserves. Against this backdrop, governments have been preoccupied with fixing short-term problems. Few reforms have been undertaken towards a serious reduction of unemployment, which remains

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particularly high amongst the youth and well-educated youth, to improve access to healthcare and affordable housing, reduce corruption, or promote economic diversification. In addition, disparities in regional development within each country remain a problem (see infographics).

The security situation in the region has also deteriorated since 2011. Several countries have experienced an increase in Islamist violence. Some jihadi groups in these countries have linkages to or affiliations with regional franchises of al-Qaida or with the so-called Islamic State (IS), the latter of which is expanding in transition countries. Violence remains largely directed at security forces, which themselves have been in-

involved in the violent repression of members of population in some countries. However, attackers have also targeted tourists in 2014 (Hervé Gourdel, Algeria; Korean tourist bus, Egypt) and 2015 (Sousse attack, Tunisia; Thomson Airways plane, per-haps Russian Metrojet plane, Egypt).

The fact that many countries in the region are unable to control the entirety of their territories, with Libya being one of the most dramatic examples, is a highly destabilizing factor for the whole region that facilitates the proliferation of armed jihadi groups, including IS affiliates. In addition, due to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, there is the additional potential risk that returning foreign fighters may join jihadi groups in their home countries to recruit and carry out attacks. Tunisia is the primary “exporter” of foreign fighters (3,000 as of May 2015) after Saudi Arabia, with Moroccans, too, being well represented (1,200 as of May 2015). There is evidence of similar developments in Egypt.

In addition to these political, socio-economic, and security challenges, many transition countries are also transit countries for migrants, who are mostly from sub-Saharan African countries and often attempting to reach Europe. A lack of coherent asylum, immigration, and integration policies as well as poor border controls in North African countries has afforded human traffickers opportunities to exploit vulnerable irregular migrants and refugees. Refugees and irregular migrants may also be detained in poor conditions or alongside criminals in prisons, as well as denied ade-

quate medical treatment and legal advice. In some instances, the principle of non-refoulement enshrined in the Geneva Refugee Convention is also violated.

A Program for North Africa

The Arab uprisings required prompt action on the part of external actors in the region, including Switzerland. Switzerland acted rapidly to freeze the assets of the former leaders and their associates and to protect the reputation of the Swiss financial sector. As Libya slid into a civil war, many Libyans and migrant workers in the country fled to neighboring countries. In response, Switzerland established a humanitarian aid office in Benghazi and set up medical projects in the city. Additionally, the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) and the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) assisted migrant workers in Libya in returning to their home countries.

In addition to these emergency measures, the Federal Council decided in March 2011 to create a program to support the transition processes in North Africa, and concluded a Memorandum of Understanding with Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia outlining the implementation of this program in July 2011. The Program Document North Africa 2011–16 envisions a whole-of-government effort involving the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) through the Directorate of Political Affairs, the Directorate of Public International Law, and the SDC; the Federal Department of Justice and Police (FDJP) through the FOM; and the Federal Department of Economic Affairs (FDEA) through the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO). This constellation favored a comprehensive and coordinated approach to supporting the transitions.

The program has three focal points. The first dimension of the program – democratic transitions and human rights – encompasses assistance with electoral processes, advice on constitutional matters, strengthening the rule of law, political dialog, security sector reform (SSR), strengthening civil society and human rights, helping state media to improve its role as a provider of public information, dealing with the past, and offering assistance to facilitate the rapid return of assets of politically exposed persons (PEPs) frozen by Swiss authorities. The second dimension – economic development and employment – seeks to promote the growth of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to generate employment,

especially for young people in rural areas, and to support the development of urban infrastructure projects and sustainable resources. The third dimension – migration and the protection of vulnerable people (i.e., migrants and refugees) – involves assistance with improving migration management, encouraging the integration of diaspora, and helping to ensure that vulnerable persons are protected with regards to health and conditions of detention, for example.

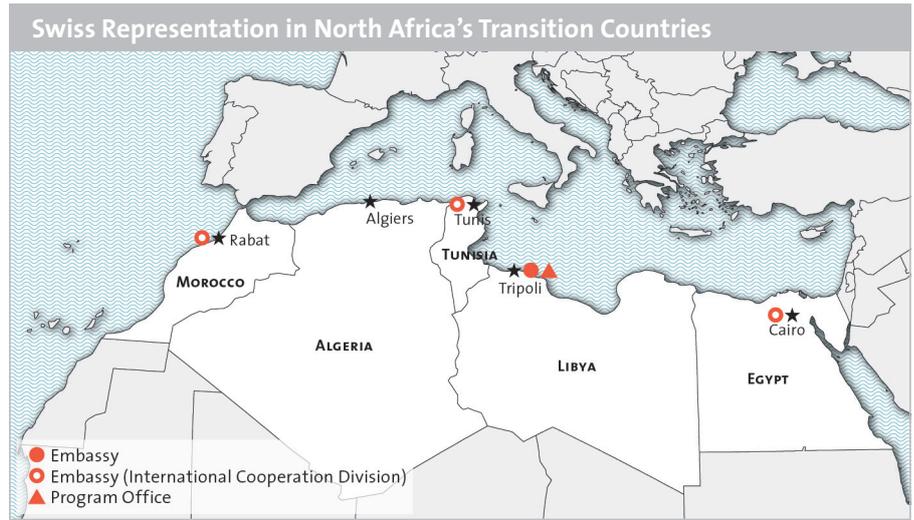
Two-thirds of the program’s annual budget of approximately CHF 60 million is allocated to economic development and employment, partly due to the costly nature of projects in this sphere and the complexity of administering them. The emphasis of the program thus far has been on Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. Some projects are also underway in Libya, although the Swiss Embassy in Tripoli, responsible for coordinating North Africa program assistance in Libya, has been temporarily closed since 2014 due to the deteriorating security situation in the country. While program funding was initially made available for the period 2011 to 2016, the program is expected to run beyond 2016, reflecting the need for long-term support for the transitions. The time is thus ripe to ask whether the program needs to be updated in light of developments since 2011.

Taking Stock after the 2011 Program

As part of its contribution to democratic transitions and the promotion of human rights, Switzerland has been able to support elections when circumstances have permitted. Support was provided for the first democratic parliamentary elections in Tunisia in 2011, for example. Switzerland

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has also provided tailor-made assistance in the area of SSR, capitalizing on its experience and reputation as a neutral partner. Working with the Geneva Centre for Democratic Control of the Armed Forces (DCAF), the program has advised Tunisian and Moroccan authorities on the reform of their security forces along more democratic lines. SSR needs vary from country to country, however. In Tunisia, there is a focus on bringing the security forces under greater parliamentary scrutiny, whereas in Morocco there is an emphasis on greater protection of human rights. In



Libya, security structures will need to be created almost from scratch. The extent to which the program is able to assist in this area is, nevertheless, circumscribed by the degree of resistance to reform from within the security sector and associated ministries. SSR in Egypt, for example, is not on the agenda at present.

Civil society in many transition countries remains weak and, in some cases, political developments have resulted in a rolling back of gains initially made after the uprisings in the field of civil liberties, such as freedom of expression and association. In principle, greater support within the framework of the program for the strengthening civil society and respect for civil freedoms would constitute a significant contribution to democratic consolidation. However, this can be a highly sensitive area in some countries, and external actors need to tread carefully, making expansion of projects in this field challenging. One area where Swiss experience could be more extensively offered is in the sphere of mediation. The ongoing political polarization and increased radicalization experienced since 2011 in all of the transition countries means that there is a need not only for inter-religious, but also intra-religious dialog, for example.

One area of the “democratic transitions and human rights” dimension of the program where Switzerland has come under most criticism is the return of frozen assets. While CHF 385 million worth of assets connected to Libyan PEPs were quickly unfrozen under UN Security Council Res-

olution 2009 in 2011, the return of Tunisian (CHF 60 million) and Egyptian frozen assets (CHF 700 million originally blocked; approx. 10 per cent linked to organized crime already unblocked) is taking longer. While Switzerland is providing support for the legal verification of the origins of these assets within the rubric of the North Africa Program, and exchanges of evidence have already occurred, the time required to unfreeze assets is dependent on the length of time needed for court proceedings and investigations to be completed locally. Moreover, Swiss authorities must be convinced of the independent nature of judiciaries in the countries concerned before it can unfreeze assets based on evidence provided.

A risk exists that the frozen assets may not be returned to Tunisian and Egyptian authorities. Under the existing Swiss federal law on the restitution of funds illegally obtained by PEPs, there is a limit of ten years on the return of frozen assets. This time limit could be further reduced if a draft bill on the freezing and restitution of assets of PEPs obtained by illegal means is passed in the near future. The latter allows assets of PEPs to be frozen for four years, with the possibility of extending this by one year on a renewable basis for up to ten years, if the authorities of the PEPs’ countries of origin express a willingness to cooperate in investigations into the origin of the assets. Given the potential for delays in determining the origin of frozen assets and doubts about independence of judiciaries, the return of frozen assets to transition authorities may not be possible. The Egyptian case could be particularly problematic. The acquittal of

Hosni Mubarak's sons of corruption charges in October 2015 and Mubarak's potential acquittal of the same charges could complicate building a case to support the claim that frozen Egyptian assets were illegally acquired.

The “economic development and employment” dimension of the program appears to be the most effective. However, this is largely because for many of the transition countries, this area is less politically sensitive than some others. Nevertheless, it does respond well to key socio-economic needs in transition countries, such as increasing the size of the private sector and the competitiveness of local enterprises in global markets, reducing unemployment, especially youth unemployment and that of young graduates, and addressing the issue of development inequalities between regions within transition countries. In Egypt, Switzerland has provided assistance to a fish farm project that aims to generate 10,000 jobs. In Tunisia, it has lent support to the creation of small companies by young people and women from poor regions, again with the aim of generating up to 10,000 jobs. Given the reluctance of transition authorities to undertake difficult structural reforms in the short term, the non-conditionality of Swiss program funding has had the advantage of allowing projects that address urgent needs to get underway without being linked to broader reforms – something that has distinguished it from the EU's “more-for-more” approach, which itself is likely to be revised to be more nuanced in light of the realities on the ground.

The comprehensive approach to migration and protection adopted by the program is also one of its strengths. One of its advantages is that it addresses the reduction of migratory pressure towards Europe – for example, by highlighting the development potential of migrants in North African countries. Nevertheless, inadequate border management capacities in most North African countries, as well as a deterioration of

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the security situation in transition countries, means that there is still a pressing need to support capacity-building in the area of border management and the treatment of migrants over the short to medium term. To this end, Switzerland has been assisting the Moroccan authorities in strengthening their reception facilities for irregular sub-Saharan migrants and refugees, for instance. Migration partnerships, such as that concluded with Tunisia, are a useful means by which Switzerland can encourage transition countries to respect international commitments with regards to refugees.

Moving Forward

Even though Switzerland's program for the support of transitions in North Africa was established very rapidly following the uprisings, it has, on the whole, stood the test of time. It was conceived as a tailored response to urgent needs on the ground.

Four years on, those grassroots needs unfortunately remain fairly constant. Some have even become more urgent, such those related to migration and protection of vulnerable persons. Indeed, this is an area where projects as well as migration partnerships could usefully be expanded. Greater political unity and security in Libya could also enable more projects to be launched in the country. Algeria is also likely to come under greater scrutiny in the future. Nevertheless, the reality is that the degree of political openness and extent of democratic consolidation in transition countries necessarily sets limits as to what can be achieved and in which areas, and this will be different in each country. This is especially true in relation to the “democratic transitions and human rights” dimension of the program. The challenge will be to combine a nuanced approach to supporting transitions with the promotion of democracy and human rights. One way in which this could be achieved is through assisting efforts to nurture a political culture of democratic decision making – something that could be done even through projects in the economic sphere.

Dr. Lisa Watanabe is a Senior Researcher at the Think Tank team “Swiss and Euro-Atlantic Security” at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zürich. She is the author of “[Eine neue Schweizer Nordafrikapolitik](#)” (2013) and co-author of *Critical Turning Points in the Middle East, 1915–2015* (2011).

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Feedback and comments: analysen@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
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